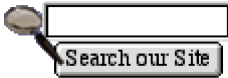


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BUSINESS

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Low water levels crimp ship canal

By Paul Brinkmann

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STURGEON BAY — A shipping canal that cuts 100 miles off the route between Chicago and Green Bay is filling in with silt, prompting some ships to avoid it completely.

And the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has no plans to do anything about it.

The Sturgeon Bay and Lake Michigan Ship Canal slices through the Door County peninsula, providing a vital shortcut to the ports of Green Bay, Sturgeon Bay and Marinette.

But the canal constantly fills up with sand, dirt and silt. It requires dredging every 10 to 15 years. The last dredging was in 1994, according to the U.S. Army Corps.

Recent low lake levels may have speeded up the silting process, resulting in a very shallow entrance, about 17 feet deep, at the mouth of the canal. Local officials say dredging is needed soon, or the clogging could create financial burdens for ships trying to enter the waters of Green Bay. That could pose problems for the local shipping economy.

"Some of our customers are uncomfortable with the water depth and therefore will sail around Door County to get into Green Bay," said Pat O'Hern, vice president in charge at Bay Shipbuilding Co. in Sturgeon Bay. "That's a lot of time, fuel and money, up to six or eight hours more under way."

O'Hern said the canal is especially vital after Green Bay freezes because the channel provides a direct link to open waters of Lake Michigan. Most of Bay Shipbuilding's traffic comes just as the bay is freezing over, because it services the Great Lakes commercial fleet of tankers, barges and carriers.

"It affects us now, but it's not painful. If the lake drops more, it will become painful," O said.

Sturgeon Bay Mayor Colleen Crocker-MacMillin, the U.S. Coast Guard and Bay Shipbuilding have requested the Army Corps dredge the canal. U.S. Rep. Mark Green forwarded their

Sturgeon Bay, Lake Michigan Ship Canal

The federal government authorized construction of the canal in 1873.

Altogether, its length is 10 miles, two miles of which were dug through a narrow spot on the peninsula essentially making no difference. In Door County an island canal shortens the trip to the southern waters of Green Bay by more than 100 miles.

According to the U.S. Army Corps, Lake Michigan is currently 21 inches below its long-term average and about 9 inches above the record low in 1964.

requests.

Green got a reply in October from Lt. Col. Thomas Magness in the Army Corps headqua Detroit, who said the need for dredging throughout the Great Lakes is "exceptional" due water, especially between lakes.

"At this time, we have no plans to dredge at the Sturgeon Bay and Lake Michigan Ship (

Magness wrote that he was aware of "shoaling" throughout the Sturgeon Bay canal, but still navigable. He stated some of the silt problems occur just outside the mouth of the (which is not federal responsibility.

A spokesman in Green's office said this week the congressman's staff is researching the and trying to determine what the Corps' responsibility is.

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